Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 45: Mental Health and People of Color

Guest: Dior Vargas

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Greetings, earthlings! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host Alice Wong. Today's episode is about mental health and people of color. My guest today is Dior Vargas, a Latina Feminist Mental Health Activist and the creator of the People of Color and Mental Illness Photo Project. Dior will talk about her photo project which started in 2014 and a new book of photo essays she edited titled *The Color Of My Mind*. This book features full page portraits of a wide range of people of color with different mental health disabilities, including short quotes about their lives. We also talk about the invisibility of people of color in the media representation of mental illness and the need for greater cultural competence in mental health. Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away we go!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!

ALICE: OK! So, Dior, thank you so much for being on my podcast today.

DIOR VARGAS: Thank you for having me. I'm so excited.

ALICE: So, Dior, do you wanna just tell me a little bit about yourself and just share anything you'd like about your work, your life?

DIOR: Sure. So, my name is Dior Vargas, and I'm a Latina Feminist Mental Health Activist. I started a photo series called the People of Color and Mental Illness Photo Project back in 2014, and I've been doing a lot of mental health advocacy since then. And I've been able to have a lot of opportunities to share my story as well as host other forms of speaking engagements around the country. And most recently, I've gone back to school to get a Master's in Public Health. And just last month, the book version of my photo project came out, and so I'm really excited about that.

How did The Color Of My Mind get started?

ALICE: Yeah. You know, I think I first started hearing about you really through your photo project, which started in 2014. And I was wondering, when it first came out, what was the response to it, and what was kind of the reason for you creating this project?

DIOR: So, just to give a little background: I have been doing activist work for many years, and I felt like I didn't really have a focus. And so, I thought that I needed to tackle an issue that was

something that I dealt with on a daily basis, and so, that was mental health. And so, when I was really figuring out what my advocacy was gonna look like, I just looked online and started doing a lot of research. And from there, I just noticed that when it came to the representation, it was very whitewashed, and there weren't a lot of diverse representations. And from there, I started asking for people to share their photos where they could write on a sign basically expressing what their experience has been like being a person of color and also living with a mental illness.

ALICE: Mmhmm. And as somebody who, as you are Latina and somebody with mental health disabilities, what was it like kinda growing up and just not seeing the stories and not really seeing yourself reflected within either the mental health community or just media in general?

DIOR: It definitely impacted the way I felt about myself. I didn't know anyone in my community who was going through what I was going through, and so I thought it was something that was completely my fault. I felt like it was a reflection of my character and my lack of strength. And so, I felt very alone, and I felt very isolated. And I felt like I really had no one to talk to about what I was going through. And so, I feel like if I had known earlier that I wasn't the only person that was going through this, that I wouldn't have felt so alone. And so, I wanted to create a space where people would see faces that look like theirs, or they would find a sense of community and the experiences of others.

[mellow music break]

Editing and publishing the book

ALICE: You are the editor of this new book that you have, *The Color Of My Mind.* What was it like being the editor of this book, and what made you decide to publish this as a book?

DIOR: I really loved seeing, and I really loved receiving the photos from people for the online version, and it just, it was something that made me really happy and feel like I was doing something to make a difference. And I decided that I wanted to have an event surrounding the project, and I remember printing the photos that were submitted by people. And unfortunately, some of the photos weren't high resolution, and so when I printed them, I just noticed that the quality of the photos weren't doing justice to their experiences. And so, I thought, well, what if I wanted to do more with this project? And so, I thought, why don't I just see what I can do to raise money to make these photos more accessible? And so for me, I wanted to acknowledge that people may not have Internet access or may not know about this, and I wanted to be able to bring these photos into the community and start conversations more organically that way. And so, I was able to raise money and work with a photographer, so then I could get high-resolution photos. And I also was thinking about how another way of making it accessible is having it in book form.

And the whole process was really interesting. This whole process has been a very grueling learning experience. I really loved not even just editing it but everything beforehand: reaching out to people. It was very, there was a lot of work to be done to organize meeting with people, having a schedule for when people would come and have their photo taken. And I really enjoyed meeting the new people and hearing their stories and having those really intimate conversations. And I really witnessed the strength and the resilience and the powerful…I guess just how powerful people were in being so brave and sharing their stories with me. And so, I just really loved seeing this book put together and finding a way to pay tribute to our experiences and to show our full humanity through these experiences. And so, it was amazing.

And I'm currently meeting with the participants to give them their book, and so to be able to reconnect and see where they are in their lives and to feel like sometimes it feels like no time has passed. It just comes full circle, and I'm just really honored to have been given the opportunity to do this.

ALICE: I guess can you tell me a little bit more about your thought process as the editor in terms of selecting these 34 people? Because I'm guessing you probably had a lot of hard choices you had to make.

DIOR: So, my aim was to have 50 people in the book, and I did have about that number. Unfortunately, through the process, some people the day of weren't able to come to the studio space to get their photo taken. And I can acknowledge the reality of that. I mean just having your photo being taken, I think that can be very nerve wracking, and acknowledging that, the experiences of these individuals where they might be going through an episode or having an anxiety attack or experiencing something where they feel like they can't leave their house, or it's just something that's too overwhelming for them. And so, I understood and respected that, and I still was able to get 34 people. I didn't take anyone out of the book. Every person who came and had their photo taken was included in the book.

And I wanted to make sure that there were as many diverse stories as possible. There are people from different genders and sexual identities and different races, ethnicities. And in terms of going through the conversations, there were a lot of great things in what each of the individuals said, but I wanted something that really stood out, that really…that I wanted people to see and read and relate to. And so, hearing about things that they've learned, things that they've experienced, and how things that help sustain them. A lot of people shared about being activists and how that helped them move through tough times. Some people how they used their creativity to really push forward.

And so, there were a lot of different things and how race really plays a factor in even how you go about the world and how that intersection between mainly what the book is about: just walking around in this world where you experience oppression due to the various identities that you carry, and how do you live your life? And I just wanted to show the varied experiences. I think that overall, I wanted the book to show hope, but I didn't want it to be idealistic.

ALICE: Mmhmm. Yeah, this isn't inspiration porn.

DIOR: Oh, yes! Definitely.

ALICE: [laughs]

[chill music break]

People participating and trusting Dior with their stories

ALICE: Was it difficult at first having folks participate, having folks trust you with their stories and their images?

DIOR: I think that in the beginning, it was hard to come by individuals who were willing to share their stories. There was definitely stigma back then, and there still is. And so, I understood why people were apprehensive to share their stories and their photos for fear of their family members coming across it or even employers or future employers. At first it was hard, and then I started getting a lot more images. Right now, it's pretty slow. People aren't as…people aren't

sharing their photos as much. But I think that as long as people are sharing their stories and their experiences in other ways, I think that's important.

Cultural competence, gaps in mental health services, and #DisabilityTooWhite

ALICE: Yeah, because I think it reminds me of Vilissa K. Thompson's #DisabilityTooWhite where I think the image of mental illness—whether we like it or not—in the media and popular culture is overwhelmingly white. And how this has kind of reshaped the advocacy that you really wanna focus on. What do you think are the major gaps in terms of mental health outreach, services, disparities, cultural competence?

DIOR: I definitely think there's a lack of cultural competency or cultural humility when it comes to people of color when they seek care. I mean even access is a huge problem: not being able to, like for one thing, if you don't have insurance, that makes it even more difficult to find someone who, you can't even think about finding someone who looks like you, but finding someone in general who has a sliding scale, who accepts certain forms of payment. And so, I think that it can be really hard for people to access care when they're trying to live day to day, and they don't have the funds in order to pay for a therapist. And so, that can be very difficult. But even people who do have insurance, it can still be hard to find someone who understands where you're coming from, where you don't have to spend the whole session explaining where you come from and why you have certain cultural beliefs.

And so, I think that, all around, I think that people feel like they don't have the support that they need. And I would love to see more people of color in the mental health profession, and I would love to see more people who, if they aren't of color, that they have a really genuine and deep understanding of other people's cultural experiences and how they carry that with them. And so, there's so many things that need to be improved, and I'm hoping that I can use my, since I'm back in school, I'm hoping that I can use what I learn from there in order to move this work forward and see what I can contribute in more ways than the small ways that I already have.

ALICE: Well, I wouldn't call it that small. I think—

DIOR: [laughs]

Summing up the photo project for service providers and policymakers

ALICE: I think creating media, creating culture is really powerful, and it goes hand in hand with advocacy. I'm thinking about your images and your stories and thinking about what do you think are kinda like the top two or three messages that they're sending to service providers and policymakers? For example, if all these photos were condensed into like two or three bullet points for service providers and policymakers about the lived experience, what would be some of the takeaways?

DIOR: I think to really see the full humanity of people who are living with these conditions, really acknowledging that they are a person and that we need to make sure that our policies and our programs are person-centered. That we acknowledge that people know what they need; people are the expert of their own journey. And I think that that is a huge component. Also, just to find, to really listen to the experiences of other people. People with lived experience, they know what they're going through. I mean those are just some of the things that I'm thinking about, but really also just thinking about the reality of people's experiences. I think that a lot of times, we have these ideas that we might wanna push forward but definitely make sure that they're culturally-sensitive and that they acknowledge the reality of people's experiences. One thing is having the

idea, but it's also about implementation and execution and really acknowledging the real experiences of people who are gonna be navigating these policies and these systems.

[mellow music break]

Dior's future work and goals and purchasing the book

ALICE: You mentioned earlier that you are getting a Master's in Public Health. What do you see down the line for yourself? What's next for you in 2019 or let's say five years from now? What's Dior Vargas gonna be up to?

DIOR: [chuckles] So, I'm getting a Master's in Public Health and NYU, and my concentration is policy. And so, I'm hoping to be more involved in mental health policy. And so, trying to find my way into increasing access and improving the way that people receive care. In terms of the future, I would love to find a way to really revamp the way that the mental health system works and make it as innovative and progressive, and I just want every individual to come across this system and feel supported and feel like their needs are heard, and it's not about quotas or it's not about money. And I know it's hard. I mean it's very idealistic to dream of a system where people just get the care that they deserve and can live a better quality of life. But for me, it's just something that I really hope to see in my lifetime.

ALICE: And I think it's good to dream. I think it's good to have huge goals that seem really impossible. But changing the institutions and systems that are centered on white supremacy and ableism is gonna take time 'cause we gotta smash it.

So, for people who wanna order *The Color Of My Mind*, how can they do that?

DIOR: So, there is a page on my website, which is DiorVargas.com. The actual URL is DiorVargas.com/shop/book. And you can purchase the book there. It's currently on backorder, but I'm currently working with the printer to get more books available. And I'm currently manually sending the books, so this is definitely a labor of love, and I really appreciate every person who has bought a book. And I'm hoping that this book can reach as many people as possible.

ALICE: Well, I really hope that anybody who's going into mental health will read this book because it should be part of a syllabus for med school, nursing, just all these health sciences. I think that this'll be like a perfect fit for them.

Is there anything else you'd like to share with me as we wrap up this interview?

DIOR: Not at the moment. Again, just thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to be able to have a lengthier conversation with you. We've had moments where we've been able to see one another in person, but I'm really thankful we had this conversation.

Wrap-up

ALICE: Well, I'm just really excited about— Well, I've been following your activism for a long time, and I'm just so thrilled to see you kind of evolve and with this book. I know you're gonna change the world. You already are changing the world, but I think I'm just so excited to see what you do in the future as well. So, thank you for joining me.

DIOR: Thank you so much.

[hip hop]

♪ you don't disrespect your duty
on the black top, cat walk, colfax, wax on
hoe strut, pole dance, romance, hat's off
knees up, toes down, let's dance…. ♪

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more Dior and how to order her book on our website.

The audio producer for this episode is Geraldine Ah-Sue. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byeee!!

♪ …rocket till the blast off
stop, drop, dance off ♪